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**H.B. 5746, An Act Concerning a Task Force on Childhood Obesity**  
**Public Health Committee**  
**February 27, 2013**

Senator Gerratana, Representative Johnson and members of the Public Health Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony.

On behalf of the Connecticut Alliance of YMCAs, we strongly support the passage of H.B. 5746, An Act Concerning a Task Force on Childhood Obesity, and H.B. 5110, An Act Concerning the Development and Use of a Universal Child Health Form.

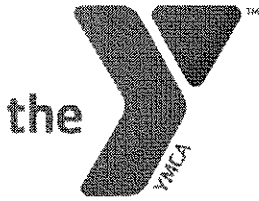
The Connecticut Alliance of YMCAs is keenly aware of the staggering rates of childhood obesity rates in Connecticut. This issue impacts a child's long-term health and performance in the classroom. It can also have a lifelong psychological effect on a child.

To address this issue, in 2009 the YMCAs of Connecticut helped launch the Statewide Pioneering Health Communities (Statewide PHC) initiative to address childhood obesity through policy, system and environmental changes.

The program was funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Sam's Club. The Y serves as convener and co-leaders in the community and at the state level to form coalitions comprised of community and state-level leaders.

Connecticut and the communities of Darien, East Hartford/Plainville, Southington, Wallingford, Waterbury and Wilton were chosen in the first cohort of Statewide PHC in 2009. I have attached a summary that outlines what was done in each of these 6 communities.

The Connecticut Alliance of YMCAs believes that this program can serve as a model for other communities and is willing to work with the Connecticut Department of Health and Connecticut Department of Education to seek additional grants and assist in coordination of this type of program.



FOR YOUTH DEVELOPMENT  
FOR HEALTHY LIVING  
FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

# IN THE SPOTLIGHT: CONNECTICUT

## BACKGROUND

Launched in 2009, the Statewide Pioneering Healthier Communities (Statewide PHC) initiative addresses the childhood obesity epidemic through policy, system, and environmental changes with implications for communities, states and the nation. With funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) and Sam's Club® this program operates at the local and state levels in six states (Connecticut, Illinois, Kentucky, Michigan, Ohio, and Tennessee) and 37 communities. Participating Ys and their communities represent small, medium and large communities in rural, suburban and urban areas with many sites focusing on low-income, underserved, racial, and ethnic populations.

The Y serves as a convener and co-leader in the community and at the state level to form coalitions comprised of community and state-level leaders that are involved throughout the initiative using their positions, influence, and ability to make changes within the greater community and state. Multiple sectors and diverse organizations are involved to maximize experience, assets, resources and skills working to meet the specific needs of each community and state.

## ACTION AT THE STATE LEVEL

In Connecticut, the Statewide PHC team has focused on expanding opportunities for physical activity for children during school time. Its efforts paid off in May 2012, when the governor signed education reform legislation that encourages each local and regional board of education to require schools to offer 20 minutes of physical activity to students every day. The legislation also authorizes funding and a pilot in two school districts for a coordinated school health program that establishes goals and benchmarks for healthy eating and physical exercise during the school day.

The Statewide PHC team also worked with other organizations to encourage school districts to participate in the U.S. Department of Agriculture's school breakfast program. There are many examples of children arriving at school hungry and not being able to focus on their school work. The problem was that schools did not know the program was available, or that they were eligible. Members of the Statewide PHC team shared information with school districts and guided them through the process of joining the school breakfast program. As a result, the number of participating districts keeps growing.

Connecticut and its communities of Darien, East Hartford/Plainville, Southington, Wallingford, Waterbury, and Wilton were chosen in the first cohort of Statewide PHC in 2009. At the local level, the six selected communities have created significant change in their area and are making the healthy choice the easy choice for their residents. The examples listed are by no means an exhaustive list of all of the great work that has been done but are highlights of the collaborative efforts of those within the community.

## LOCAL COMMUNITY SUPPORT

In the community of **Darien**, the Statewide PHC team has made improvements to the built environment to help create a community in which its residents have the opportunity to become more physically active. Teaming up with the local Parks and Recreation department, the team has developed a 1.5 mile looped walking trail that runs along the waterfront in Darien. In addition, with their Statewide PHC funds, the team purchased 14 pieces of outdoor fitness equipment that will be strategically placed along the trail to help further engage those using the trail to be active. To make the loop even more accessible, they have created running trails that connect the YMCA of Darien Community to the main walking trail in hopes of reaching thousands of individuals and encouraging them to lead healthier lifestyles.

The Statewide PHC team in the community of **East Hartford/Plainville**, has made great strides in the area of improving availability of healthy foods in their area. In East Hartford, their efforts have focused on community gardens and improving the food options available in their schools. They are using it as an opportunity to get children, families, and the community excited about gardening and growing their own food. The enthusiasm around the garden is growing and they are looking forward to the fruit this project will bear. With this new awareness around healthy living, the local Board of Education has now passed a 100% healthy food policy including booster sales. In Plainville, the team is building relationships with local restaurants to create a healthy dining guide. This guide will help community members determine where the healthy food items are being sold in their community. A local McDonald's even changed their menu options for their Happy Meals to include smaller French fries and apples. They also anticipate creating workshops where the chefs from the participating restaurants will provide cooking demonstrations that will highlight healthy food options.

In **Southington**, the Statewide PHC team has taken steps to create a school environment that offers more physical activity time for its students. The team has worked with a local elementary school to send academic and physical education teachers to trainings in order to gain insight on implementing more physical activity time in the classroom. The pilot included second graders at the elementary school and encourages the teachers to come up with creative ways to get their kids active throughout the school day. With a successful pilot, the team hopes to incorporate this model of physical activity in classrooms into the others schools. The end goal is to create a district wide policy that would require teachers to use this program in every classroom.

The Statewide PHC team in **Wallingford** has created considerable change in both the physical activity and nutrition arenas. In collaborating with the director of food service, the "Build a Tray" program was developed and has been piloted at two elementary schools in the community. This program aims to educate both children and their parents on the importance of healthy eating. The children in the schools use cafeteria trays with sheets on them that depict what they should be choosing to eat. The cafeteria has been redesigned in its messaging and feel to create an environment where the healthier choices are easier to make. In regards to physical activity improvements, the team has partnered with the local Rotary Club to purchase updated playground equipment for the children in the community to use. They have also had input on the creation of a ropes course at a local park, a neighborhood Frisbee golf course, and the placement of trail maps and sign along the already existing trailways. These public recreation areas create a built environment that provides multiple opportunities for physical activity.

In the community of **Waterbury**, the Statewide PHC group has made incredible improvements to increase physical activity opportunities by changing the built environment. The team has collaborated with other organizations such as the National Park Service in developing a seven mile pedestrian and bike path around the community. Along with this path, the team is also working to adopt a local policy that will establish the complete streets model as a part of the downtown renovations. The application for a \$500,000 Safe Routes to School grant is being used at the local Gil Marten School to create a safer environment for active transportation around the school. Main Street Waterbury and Statewide PHC have teamed up to participate in a bike rack program downtown to entice bikers as well as implemented a bike share program in multiple elementary schools by providing 30 bicycles for the children to use and incorporating a bicycle safety component.

The Statewide PHC team in the community of **Wilton** has also made a substantial impact on the built environment in terms of physical activity opportunities. The team worked to create what they call a "pedestrian zone" – a system of sidewalks and trails that connects several youth-serving organizations and activity areas which links the community of 18,000 to the facilities they use and encourages more physical activity. In collaboration with the town, an area near the high school track has been established as an Outdoor Fitness Center with four cardio equipment stations for use by the public. The community has also installed nine bike racks for bicyclists to utilize, signage along the path to indicate areas of the Norwalk River Valley Trail, and two "Wellness Kiosks" with trail maps for guidance.